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Understanding the Evangelical Right's Position on Gay Marriage

By Wendy Limbert

A A few weeks ago, I attended Focus on the Family's Love Won Out (LWO) Conference on homosexuality. As a supporter of equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, I wanted to better understand the evangelical right's views. I knew that conservative evangelicals (and others) believe that the Bible forbids intimate relationships between members of the same sex, but I wondered why that should translate to government policies that impose those views on those of us who believe differently.

Focus' View: "The Condition of Homosexuality"

Focus preaches a "biblical worldview," meaning that God created each of us and has a specific intention for our path in life. Since Focus interprets the Bible as allowing sexual behavior only in monogamous relationships between men and women, same-sex relationships are considered sinful and harmful.

Focus teaches that attraction to members of the same sex is involuntary and deeply ingrained – possibly even partly genetic. The conference speakers believe that family and cultural factors come into play as well. For instance, children can become gay or lesbian if they are sexually abused or grow up without healthy same-sex bonding with parents or peers. A gay-tolerant culture encourages individuals to experiment sexually and/or accept a gay or lesbian identity. According to Focus, there are many factors that can contribute to a person having same sex attractions, but acting on those feelings is wrong. With God's grace, a person can muster the strength to do the right thing.

Personally, I side with mainstream science on these issues (see sidebar). And although these lectures clarified Focus' anti-gay stance, I still didn't understand why non-evangelical gays and lesbians shouldn't be allowed to marry. Then I went to a break-out session titled "Our Religious Freedoms Under Fire."

The Gay Agenda…

I've heard the phrase "the gay agenda" occasionally, always from political conservatives, and I never really knew what it meant. It sounds vaguely sinister, and I couldn't imagine what the evangelical right thought gay activists were plotting, since all I've ever heard them ask for is equal rights. Well, according to the Focus speakers, that is the gay agenda. The gay agenda is to make being gay acceptable in mainstream society.

…And Why It's So Threatening

Equality for LGBT individuals is threatening to evangelicals for several reasons. First, evangelicals believe that if popular culture says being gay is ok, their kids will be more vulnerable to homosexual impulses. They believe it's one more thing that undermines their ability to raise healthy children. More importantly, the gay agenda is threatening because evangelical Christians want to be able to freely express their belief that same-sex relationships are wrong. They're afraid that if being gay is ok, their contrary opinions will be labeled "hate speech." They're afraid their kids will get in trouble at school for voicing the anti-gay opinions they've been taught at home. Focus speakers characterized these possibilities as infringing on the rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The goal of the gay activist, one speaker said, is to come out of the closet and put the Christians in.

However, the speakers were also very clear that the methods used to combat gay activism must never be judgmental, hostile, or violent, and they admitted that the church has a history of un-Christian behavior in this respect. The only acceptable approach, they said, is to treat all homosexual people with love, even while standing up for Christian rights. Relationships provide opportunities for conversation; anger and hostility only encourage defensiveness.

Where Do We Go From Here?

For groups like Citizens Project that advocate for equal rights and the separation of church and state, the LWO ministry presents a number of implications.

First, while their intentions to avoid hostility are commendable, they are working hard to promote their own agenda in support of discriminatory laws. Focus is arming its followers with ideology, talking points, and practical everyday strategies, and would love to turn back the clock on the progress toward LGBT equality that's been made in the last few decades. LGBT advocates and allies need to ask ourselves if we're working as hard, and contributing as much, to keep things moving forward.

Second, Focus' rhetoric around these issues reinforces feelings of threat. LWO speakers explicitly stated that gay marriage amounts to an overthrowing of Christian morality, and therefore the overthrowing of Christian religion as a whole. Suddenly, it's not about equal rights but religious persecution and the end of the world as we know it. Advocates and allies may not effectively counter this messaging among the evangelical right, but it's important to speak up in everyday situations among our friends and acquaintances, so that the conservative evangelical view isn't the only one being heard.

Finally, the way in which Focus addresses these issues reduces the possibilities for finding common ground among religious conservatives and LGBT activists and allies. Groups like Citizens Project are critical because they instead seek to advance dialogue and find points of agreement that are grounded in the basic legal rights guaranteed to every person.

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Editor's Note: Citizens Project believes civil rights and religious freedom are not incompatible. People's ability to worship, believe and speak as they choose is not curtailed by allowing gays and lesbians the same civil rights as heterosexuals. Appropriate religious exemptions from nondiscrimination laws can be crafted to ensure that everyone's rights are protected.

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For most of us, the month of December conjures a variety of images: snow, eggnog, warm fires and of course—the holidays. We all choose to observe or abstain from seasonal celebrations in our own ways, but one area where choice is not always an option is in our schools. It is not uncommon for well-meaning schools to make holiday practices a part of the educational curriculum. When religious observances become an agenda of publically-funded institutions, there is a clear violation of the separation of church and state. Learn more about inclusive holiday practices and maintenance of the church-state division at citizensproject.org.

A Science-Based View

According to the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association, homosexuality hasn't been considered a "condition" since the mid-1970's. Several decades' worth of research shows that people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender live lives that are just as happy and fulfilled as people who identify themselves as straight. Any stress associated with identifying as LGBT typically results from experiences of anti-gay prejudice and discrimination. Researchers don't agree on what causes a person to have a particular sexual orientation, but there is widespread agreement that most people experience little or no sense of choice in the matter, and that people who conceal their sexual orientation are more likely to have mental health concerns than people who are more open.

Research also shows that same-sex relationships are similar to opposite-sex relationships with respect to relationship satisfaction and commitment. And according to the American Psychological Association, "the children of lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from the children of heterosexual parents in their development, adjustment, or overall well-being."

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